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Manchester
Art Gallery

Evaluation of the Clore Art Studio: a continuous swirling line, vibrant colour and humble objects

26th October 2013 – 30th January 2014



FINAL REPORT

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Introduction: setting the scene

The Clore Art Studio is set within the heart of Manchester City Art Gallery. It is a creative space that is primarily for children and families. It replaces the Clore Interactive Gallery, which because of its fixed interactive installations was proving costly to maintain. Additionally, significant shifts in thinking in relation to how visitors use museum and gallery space as well as shifts in museum and gallery pedagogy had occurred; these shifts gave impetus to the materialisation of the Clore Art Studio.



A number of ambitions underpinned the development of the Clore Art Studio. Primarily, the Family Learning team wanted to ‘create a materially rich and sensory environment that could be changed and adapted by visitors, including children and families’. The team also wanted children to ‘find their own routes into creative play’ and for the children ‘to make their own choices and create their own meanings and narratives rather than be reliant on ones that had been decided by the Gallery’¹.

The Clore Art Studio brief was to use the wider gallery collections and temporary exhibitions as a starting point. Grayson Perry’s, ‘The Vanity of Small Differences’, a series of six tapestries was selected as a stimulus that influenced the overall design of the Clore Art Studio. Three artists, Sarah Marsh, Michiko Fujii and Katy McCall together with members of the Gallery’s Family Learning Team worked off three particular threads that Perry’s tapestries had prompted: the swirling continuous line, the vibrant colour palette and humble domestic objects that commonly furnish our homes². Whilst access to the studio was open to the general public it was children

¹ Information retrieved from the Manchester gallery web site
(<http://www.manchestergalleries.org/whats-on/permanent-galleries/clore-art-studio/>)

² Information from an interview undertaken with Ms Alex Thorp, Family Learning Manager

aged 0-7 years and their families who were uppermost in the minds of the artists and the Family Learning Team when conceptualising the Studio.



The three core questions

The three core questions that the Family Learning team would like this evaluation to address are:

1. What learning takes place in the Clore Art Studio and how can we optimise this learning environment in the future?
2. Which audience or age group benefit the most from this space and how can we talk about their experiences?
3. What is the role of the artist and the volunteer in facilitating the space?

In order to address each of these questions members of the Manchester Metropolitan University evaluation team gathered qualitative data that included observations including filmed documentation of children, families, young adults, teachers, members of the Family Learning Team and volunteers when engaged with/in the Clore Art Studio Space. Additionally interviews were undertaken with the Family Learning Manager, volunteers, parents, teachers, the artists that helped to design the Studio space and the artists that facilitated the space across the weekends. The evaluation team also had access to reflective diaries that were regularly completed by the volunteers and the Gallery's own archives of film and photographs.

In analysing the data the evaluation team have drawn on social constructivist theories where it is asserted that knowledge and meanings are actively and collaboratively constructed (James & Prout, 1997). We also draw on Foucault's theories in relation to discourse so as to be sensitive to the ways in which some discursive practices potentiate certain actions whilst other practices might block other possibilities. The framework also incorporates insights from theories that take objects as a starting point and where from variously different epistemological vantage points (e.g. anthropology, art history, classical studies, critical studies, cultural theory and philosophy) objects are understood as being imbued with, amongst other things, agency, class, gender, power, magic and so on. The report also recognizes recent research in neuroscience, which opens up interesting debates about 'the social brain' (Torrance and MacLure, 2010) and which offers further possibilities when discussing learning, especially the benefits of learning within a space such as the Clore Art Studio. Finally, those

theorists who take our embodied relations with the material world seriously also influence us. Here the task is to consider the flows, interconnections and relationships between the human and non-human. Such processes, it is argued, offer us a different way of thinking, thinking that is outside our customary reliance on theoretical reason and mental habits of linearity and objectivity (Braidotti, 2002; Massumi, 2008; Deleuze and Guattari, 1984).

In undertaking the evaluation, the team followed MMU ethical protocols as well as those that have been developed by the British Educational Research Association. The team also tried to ensure that in addition to seeking parental agreement they also sought explicit and tacit consent from the very young (Alderson, 1995; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Addressing the questions

In order to address questions 1 and 2 we will focus attention on three individual children as well as a group of children who are representative of the age span in terms of children participating in the Studio. Whilst mindful of the questions posed by the Family Learning team we are also conscious of the need to address yet also maintain a degree of reflexivity around ideas of 'benefit' and 'audience'. In addressing question 3 we will draw on interview data that has been collected from both Artists and volunteers.

Matilda

Matilda was 18 months old when she attended the Studio. Both her mother and father accompanied her. Whilst it was clear Matilda had some language most of her communication was undertaken with her body. Matilda seemed quite relaxed as she made her way directly to the installation. Her father, whilst remaining quite physically close to Matilda seemed more interested in finding out what she would 'do' on her own. Her mother remained at the edges of the installation taking photographs.

Matilda pauses, points, her father looks towards the direction indicated by the arm. Her father's eyes follow her arm but before he can say anything Matilda has turned to the white hooks. She connects one of her fingers to the hook and glances back at her father. She turns to the next crate where a yellow duck sits poised in the centre of a wooden frame. Matilda stretches her body, using one hand to steady herself on a crate whilst the other holds the wooden frame with just a thumb resting on the duck.



She does a slight turn in the direction of her father, and her face seems to indicate that she wants some sort of approval from him to continue in her explorations. He smiles but stays quiet. There is a rush of movement as Matilda manages to grasp the wooden frame, leaving the duck still sitting on the shelf. Matilda has to balance: feet, legs and arms all working to keep her upright, as well as hold on to the wooden frame. The hand that is free is splayed as if already prepared for the possibility of falling. Her head is down and there is an air of intense concentration as arms, frame, head, body, eyes and the floor appear to work together...



... Poised she reaches for a yellow duck that has been resting on a yellow cloth that has been spread on the floor. With arms raised to shoulder height, with the wooden frame in one hand and the duck in the other she looks squarely at her father. Her eyes are wide and her mouth is caught between smiling and wanting to speak...



The wooden frame is left propped against a blue bowl... The hand still grasps the duck. She places it in the blue colander before scanning the room for other ducks...soon there are two, then three ducks all placed in the colander with earnest concentration.

She looks back at the shelf that had held the wooden frame and walks purposefully to the crate, stretches her body and retrieves the duck that had been left behind...she moves quickly back to the blue colander, arm already poised so as to have the necessary trajectory in order to get the duck into the colander. She stands still, legs splayed for additional balance; back leaning inwards. She looks intently at the collection of ducks now gathered in the blue colander. All of her body seems caught up in the act of looking, focusing on the ducks...

... She turns towards the raised platform where a selection of red baskets have been placed by a large, stick back white chair that lies awry and which has had red ribbons and tassels tied haphazardly through its struts...she empties a basket of red washing up pads, the sort that are sponge one side and abrasive the other.



She picks a sponge up and places the soft side against her cheek, whilst her other arm is held out to one side, with the hand held as if gripping. It too seems to be thinking, making a connection with the other arm, the other hand, the sponge and her cheek. One by one each of the sponges is raised to her cheek Before being dropped into a yellow bucket...



...She mounts a wooden frame...carefully she holds on to this and the higher wooden plinth...she pauses, one hand flat, the other gripping the side, she shoves up on her arms...toes at the ready...does she need her father's help?...She stands, holding onto a frame...smiles as she notices her mother with a camera...



(Field notes, December 27th 2013 plus photographic documentation)

Thinking with and through Matilda: learning, benefits and the future

In thinking with and through Matilda we have found it productive to incorporate Deleuze and Guattari's (1984) ideas in relation to 'assemblage'. An assemblage is any number of 'things' or pieces of 'things' that are gathered together in a single context and as an assemblage can bring about any number of affects, such as sensation and effects including having the power to influence. With reference to Matilda, we can understand her as being caught within and part of an assemblage that includes 'real' things such as her body, the ducks, chair, sponge, mother, father, Studio floor and so on. But an assemblage is more than the 'real'. It also includes affect that moves in and between all the components of the assemblage and whilst we cannot nail these down they nevertheless have both power and force. The photographs of Matilda in the Clore Art Studio are useful triggers in making us mindful of other elements that will be in circulation including: memory, anticipation, wariness, trepidation, joy, touch, sensation, affect...And it is this 'stuff', the 'something' that is happening between the duck, chair, hand and so on that brings about what Deleuze refers to as a 'becoming'.

The Deluzian 'becoming' is always a constituent part of the assemblage, where it is understood as a process of change, flight, or movement within an assemblage. So, rather than see Matilda and the Clore Art Studio as an organic whole, where the specific elements are held in place by the organization of a unity, we can consider her and the objects caught within the processes of 'becoming', where one piece of the

assemblage (hand/s) is drawn into the territory of another piece (duck/s), changing its value as an element and bringing about something else. Brian Massumi (2008) in following Deleuze suggests that whilst Matilda's encounters including that with the ducks and the sponges could be thought of as 'repetitive', he nevertheless argues that 'each repetition will be different to a degree, because there will be microvariations that give it- [the encounter with the sponge/duck] - its own singular experiential quality'. Massumi argues that each time Matilda brings, for instance, the sponge to her cheek there will be 'difference in variation' which he describes as a 'thinking-feeling of a margin of changeability' (p. 55). So, whilst each sponge that Matilda picks up is like its counterpart, how far this likeness goes 'is determined by the body's relation to the thing' (p. 55). In coining the phrase 'thinking-feeling' Massumi is tampering the ontological dyad where the mind is valorized over the body. As he notes, 'It is not cognition per se, like a recognition or deduction. It's *integral*.' (p. 55, our emphasis). Massumi employs the phrase 'qualitative growth' in order to capture how moves, including those that pass between Matilda and the sponges or those between her and the ducks add 'something new to the world, an added reality' (2008, p. 12).

Qualitative growth: benefits for learning

This notion of 'qualitative growth' is an interesting idea to contemplate when thinking about learning, specifically the benefits of learning within a context like the Clore Art Studio. If we momentarily turn to Matilda's parents we can begin to get closer to understanding the work of 'qualitative growth'. They noted how the environment was in itself teaching Matilda; this is an idea, which is deeply significant in the preschools of Reggio Emilia (Rinaldi, 2006). But what did surprise them was Matilda's tenacity to work independently with the objects. Matilda's tenaciousness with the humble sponge is, we would suggest, a triggering point for extending our thinking around social constructivism where it is assumed that understanding, significance, and meaning are developed not separately within the individual, but in coordination with other human beings. And whilst we are sympathetic to this position and are in no way negating or disputing this assumption it nevertheless does place an emphasis on human relations and in so doing ignores or erases Matilda's relations with the non-human.

The close observations of Matilda together with the Deleuzian concepts of 'assemblage' and 'becoming' make us mindful of the many thinking-feeling exchanges where mind and body interrelations continually produce, evoke and awake in Matilda forms of learning that go beyond what we might have assumed. It also produces learning which we can see happening but which we cannot, with any degree of certainty, name it. In thinking of her encounter with the humble washing up sponge we could resort to categorization, to reduce it to a sorting exercise. But to do so means we have to forget the intensity of her concentration, the stillness that surrounded this moment, the inexplicable 'something' that was occurring between hand, cheek, sponge, redness, memory, sensation and so on. Would we not be better advised to think of this as a 'becoming, as a continuous opening of the assemblage where there is

always possibilities for different relations each with a capacity for 'qualitative growth'?

Matilda's qualitative growth can also be understood as a healthy antidote in warding off some of the discursive practices (Foucault, 1978) of early years education including the 'stages and ages' linear approaches to learning. Her encounters with the Clore Art Studio means that she and the objects are continuously in the making, where objects and child become 'different within each encounter' (Springgay, 2008, p. 115). Encounters, argues Todd (2003) between self and other 'are a profoundly ethical event premised on unpredictability and non-intentionality' (Springgay, 2008, p. 116). It is ethical when we recognize how the encounter itself is implicated in the broader relations and circuits of production and exchange (Ahmed, 2000, p. 152). We would like to suggest that in thinking of 'benefits' and 'optimising learning' they should be understood as always caught within the 'assemblage', where 'becoming' including becoming artist will be organic, molecular, often unintentional, often unpredictable.

Thinking with and through a pair of yellow gloves

We want to turn now to a girl aged four and half years where we find her testing out the properties of a pair of yellow rubber gloves. She is observed as she stretches them, smells them and places them to her face, tracing them up and down her cheeks:

As she is putting them on, I hear them squeak and snap as she carefully, slowly, negotiates each finger into the correct finger space. First one hand, then the other. Wiggling her fingers and watching the surplus rubber flop over them, she tries to connect the tips of her outstretched fingers to the very tips of the gloves. Pulling and yanking at the material almost willing it to do as it was told; trying to get as inside the gloves as possible, but to no avail...

She turns, and tries to manipulate other objects, but her new hands can not grasp the cup, or the teapot which fall unceremoniously to the floor making a loud bang that echoes around the room, forcing others to turn around to see what had happened. She turns her back to the teapot and the onlookers and is still for a moment. She begins to move her fingers again, then her hands and then her arms. Her movements become exaggerated, her arms reaching out as far as possible and in this moment she becomes more than she once was, her whole body in motion, her mouth smiles.

Becoming more than she once was

Again, the concept of an 'assemblage' is a useful and productive way of understanding the forms of learning and the benefits that are in circulation as a consequence of hands, face and glove interacting. Useful because the rubber gloves push beyond the boundary of 'practical' or 'humble' in order to become 'something else'. This something else or 'becoming' is described by Massumi (2002) as mutually implicated where, "'body' and 'object' exist as only as implicated in each other...There are mutual implications. The thing, the object, can be considered

prosthesis [original emphasis] of the body- provided it is remembered that the body is equally prosthesis of the thing...It is not clear who is used by whom” (p. 96).

To speak of prosthesis is of course to summon an image of the artificial hand or leg. These artificial body parts, despite radical scientific developments will never fully augment the fine sensations that hands, fingertips and toes can undertake. Yet the productivity of the gloves potentiated huge new hands, that whilst disproportionate to the rest of the small body, could nevertheless reach higher, wider, further than before, creating possibilities in the child's ‘becoming’; changing the capacity/potential of her body to affect/be affected; of what her body could ‘do’. Importantly, these capacities cannot be been known prior to or in advance of this material bodily encounter so the spaces for movement were, until that point, unknown.

The open-productivity of the gloves rests in their capacity to both mimic and alter the familiarity and habit of touch. So, even though they prevent mastery where objects are grasped firmly and were part responsible for interrupting the play of others and were, moreover, a possible source of embarrassment, they nevertheless provided productive openings where similar but yet qualitatively different sensations could occur.

At this juncture we think it might be helpful to turn to the reflections that were made by the observer. She writes:

After my observation, I tried on a pair of these gloves. Immediately the sensation of them, the sounds they made, the smell and how they felt when I used my gloved hands to pick up another object made me want to immediately take them off. They made me cringe; they evoked memories and thoughts about the functions of rubber gloves. I wondered what memories or thoughts might have been provoked for the child. I wondered what connections she was making to her world, if any. Was she building on her prior knowledge and experience/family and peer relationships, or were new, previously unthought-of, connections being made?

Following Massumi, we suggest that whilst the girl will be building on prior knowledge the gloves potentiate (un)canny forms of pleasure. A pleasure that prompted not only a smile but also, we would suggest, a form of qualitative growth.

Repetition and Rewiring

Our third observation focuses on a boy also aged four:

I was filming when I felt a tug at my jeans. ‘Do you want to film me?’ asked a young boy. ‘I’m making a zip wire...over there’ (he directed my gaze with an extended arm and pointing finger) ...

He had tied a ribbon between two chairs - one upright, the other inverted - to create a downwards-diagonal slope with enough tension to keep the ribbon taught. Another piece of ribbon was draped over the slope and had been threaded and tied to a small

plastic waste paper bin via some obliging holes on either side. He started to fill the bin with plastic yellow ducks and sponges. But the weight of the bin, ducks, sponges and his hand as he rapidly moved the cargo up and down, collectively pulled on the zip wire ribbon forcing it to bow, and the chair, to subsequently move and scrape along the floor. He stopped and looked at me...

Almost immediately, he started to reconsider what was happening. He removed some of the items from the bin and placed the chair back to its original position. His hands were more careful this time as he guided the ribbon and the bin (with all its contents) safely to its destination.

This boy and his engagements with the objects offer us the means to think further about ‘learning’ and ‘benefits’. On one hand it would appear that the boy could move from an idea to the execution of it. He also has the resilience to persevere and resolve a problem. Yet there are other factors surrounding this observation, which must also be acknowledged. The first is that this boy had a fascination, perhaps bordering on an obsession with zip-wires following an experience of going on one in a park. As his mother said in interview, ‘...since then he has been making zip wires all over Manchester’. This included at home and in other social learning environments including galleries and museums. So, in returning to the observation it is likely that what was being observed might well have been a repetitive reconstruction where whilst the materials might have been different nevertheless the outcome was the same, a zip-wire.

Torrance and MacLure (2012), in taking note of new research that is emanating from studies of the brain make the point that the brain is highly plastic. They continue:

... we learn throughout our lives and such learning changes the brain’s structure - connecting and re-connecting neural networks in different ways, with practice solidifying the habituation of new knowledge and new ways of acting. The role of practice, in both senses of the word, i.e. undertaking practical activities and literally doing the same (new) thing repetitively until it becomes routine and one becomes expert, or at least competent, emerged as a key element of practice-based approaches to learning ...

However, Torrance and MacLure are also cautious about aspects of this new research, when they note:

Much of the experimental evidence derives from fairly simple sorts of decision-making, conducted under laboratory conditions (e.g. selecting one option from two possibilities) and with no information about how the experimenters themselves made judgements about what counts as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ decision.

That aside, the evidence around the plasticity of the brain is intriguing, and moreover, resonates with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) view that it is through repeated exposure to situations, places and objects, that we commit to memory the sensations, emotions and practices that these elicit in the body. Taking this perspective means that memory is 'built out of the progressive and continuous passing of one instant onto another, and the interlocking of each one, with its whole horizon, into the thickness of its successor' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 34). And, in returning to Matilda we can recall Massumi's point that repetition is never more of the same; rather, the key is to remember 'emergence, mutation, change affect composing forces, not composed forms' (Deleuze, 1988: 87). Thus, whilst the end might be summarized as a zip-wire the boy is nevertheless always becoming, 'always emergent in a relational field' (Olsson 2009, p. 32) where non-human forces are equally at play and work as constitutive factors in his learning; where non-humans 'perform actions, produce effects and alter situations' (Bennett, 2004, p. 18). So whilst the boy might desire the same output he is nevertheless implicated in a field of desires so that something else always happens. In concrete terms this might be manifested in a hand being repositioned, which whilst slight nevertheless is a form of learning.

The role of the artist or volunteer in child/space/object engagement

Robins (2013) argues that since the 1990s the number of museums and galleries commissioning artists to respond to their collections and exhibitions has increased exponentially. She draws attention to how the growth of artists' interventions lies in close relation to developments taking place in museum and gallery cultures in general, particularly the shift in the way visitors experience and learn from collections. This evaluation whilst recognising constructivist approaches of experiencing, and learning from, art work, also turns towards 'fresh and innovative' ways of engaging young children, objects and spaces paying particular attention to both the role of the volunteer as well as that of the artist. Either a volunteer is on hand in the Studio during weekdays, or at weekends, by artists.

Problematising 'lack'

We want to begin our considerations by evoking the notion of 'lack', where following both Birchall (2012) and Stephens (2012) we ask: does the presence of either the artist or the volunteer suggest that existing gallery exhibits are perceived to 'lack' something for the young child, a lack that has to be addressed through an adult? Are the artists/volunteers expected to possess particular qualities for redressing the 'lack', rendering the space/materials more engaging for the young child in ways that parents, carers, curators and exhibition designers cannot?

In beginning with this bittersweet notion of 'lack' we want to consider what it is that is missing and that has to be compensated by either an artist or the volunteer. Perhaps one aspect of this perceived 'lack' is to do with keeping young children safe. Safety was certainly an element of the volunteers' role, *"My role is supervisory. I make sure*

the children are safe"; *"When we had more ribbons, we needed more supervisors because there was more danger"*.

Similarly an artist was also safety conscious, *"There was of course the occasional health and safety or behavioural issue that required my intervention"*.

Safety is clearly an issue and the Family Learning team are always going to have to negotiate the line that lies between creativity and safety. Volunteers also have to walk this particular tightrope, where on the one hand they espoused a sort of laissez-faire philosophy, where *"The Clore is a place for children to be free, creative, dance, we let them do what they like"* yet on the other hand they are conscious of *'some of the blind-spots, the things the parents can't see'* where *'doing what they like'* becomes an untenable option.

Meanwhile, the artists tried to negotiate a different tightrope where on the one hand it was evident that they were conversant with some of the central tenets of contemporary early years pedagogy, particularly social constructivism. Here they understood that through adult/child interactions they could for instance, develop the young child's *'physical development and fine motor skills'* that in turn would lead to *'learning outcomes'*. But the fact that it is an adult who is part of the partnership is quite significant because it positions the child as *'lacking'*. As the more knowledgeable adult, the artist, can, through a process referred to as *'scaffolding'* help the child to reach what Vygotsky termed the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD has been defined as *'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers'* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

But on the other hand, as one artist noted, there was a desire to get away from *"children having 'art done to them' in the traditional model of the art gallery/museum"*. Thus, the Clore Art Studio was, from the perspective of one of the artist, a space that offered, a *"fresh approach to learning"* where children could *"put their own take on the gallery"*. A step that, for one artist had many *"benefits... it allows the children space to discover what interests them, an exploratory adventure"*.

We also considered whether the need to have artist/volunteers present was in part a way to allay adults' concerns around navigating themselves around the open studio space. As one volunteer noted, *"Some parents ask what the space is for, what they're supposed to do in it"*. In sensing the need to calm their disorientation, volunteers would guide first time visitors, *"If repeat visitors come in they just get on and we leave them to it. If they're first timers, we might have to get in there and start playing and they will often come over and join in"*.

The volunteers also saw themselves as compensating for children's unfamiliarity with the space. As one said, *"A lot of under 5s come in the studio. Some ... are more familiar with the space and the objects. Others are less certain about what to do in here"*. By modeling behaviours and by prompting adults and children, the volunteers

found different ways to entice participation, *“We think about how we’re going to set the space out, it gives people clues on how to join in”*.

The skill of artists and the volunteers

Whilst contemplating ‘lack’ as an interesting way of viewing the role of the volunteer and the artist it was nevertheless evident that both volunteers and artists had skills, knowledge and expertise that complemented and contributed to children’s experiences and to their learning. As one artist stated *“I hope my communication skills and artist perspective helped me to relate to young people in different ways than other adults, teachers etc. Acting as an equal in the collaboration”*. Another strength of the artist was their ability to connect the Studio installation with the Perry exhibition: *“I would ask the families if they had visited Grayson Perry’s work, I encouraged them to do so if they hadn’t and I also explained something of the relationship between the Clore and the Perry exhibition...the continuous line, and the place of objects. I also discussed the history of art with some of the families, especially as it related to shadows”*. Further links with the Perry exhibition were made through the ‘noises’ that emanated from the tapestries. Thus music was introduced onto the Clore Art Studio so as to resonate with the industrial machinery: *“The idea behind music being introduced was to encourage movement... repetitive movements as they weaved materials around their installation in time to the music”*.

The artists also had the confidence plus the expertise to innovate:

“I focused on making shadows. Two lamps were ... used to cast shadows which the children watched and then traced so that there was a layered approach to their practice where seeing and drawing complimented one another. With the children we discussed whether the shadow was ‘really there’... the activity allowed me to discuss the ‘birth’ of painting through tracing/outlining a shadow”. One artist also highlighted how he was able to move amongst intergenerational audiences, where he could undertake *“... practical activities”* but also take on *“an investigation of the meaning of the shadow, with this being an opportunity to engage older visitors and parents with the story of Pliny the Elder and the myth of Plato’s cave”*.

It was also evident that artists could respond to the children in qualitatively different ways, where as an example they could recognise forms of intensity: *The children often worked quietly with fixed concentration. They were involved, engaged - ‘being in the moment’...a feeling that I could empathise with as its central to my own practice as an artist”*.

It was apparent from observing the volunteers that they had a caring and sensitive attitude to the materials and objects. We observed them carefully removing knots from ribbons and setting cups, colanders and sponges out in inviting ways. As one volunteer explained he placed *“objects so that they followed a curved line or made zigzag shapes”* because he had noticed members of the Family Learning Team doing this and how it seemed *“to make the children play”*.

Bringing philosophy into the frame: the role of the artist and the volunteer

Jackson (2007) suggests that galleries need to develop a broad philosophical defence for what they do in order to supplement and strengthen their practices. What follows is an attempt to bring philosophy into the frame so as to consider the role of the artist within the Deleuzian idea of the 'assemblage' and 'becoming'. By aligning the concept of 'becoming' and 'assemblage' with and against the role of the artist and volunteer we can, we suggest, think of the role differently. We will begin with the concept of 'becoming'.



Becoming

In considering the role of the artist or volunteer as implicated in 'becoming' our ideas are influenced by the two images – Perry's, *The Upper Class at Bay* and the other which we have called, *Becoming Plastic*.

In thinking of this scene above as *Becoming Plastic* we can move from a 'straight' account to one that harmonises with the philosophical underpinnings that we are trying to work with. Thus, rather than (ac)counting where we note for instance what happened first, second and so on we also become part of the assemblage, a move that allows us to engage affectively with '*Becoming Plastic*' and thereby producing the following autoethnographic (Ellis, 2010) observation:

Head no longer human, colourfully transformed, no signifiers of lower limbs or torso, yet glimmers of an arm, flesh and the human shape captured in a different plastic skin with a million plastic eyes that allow her simultaneously to see everywhere and nowhere. Human arm connects with plastic bin, always mutating, always becoming... Plastic particles, inflatable forms, encapsulated air, smell, constant flows, movements, noises and forms mutating...an adult sits, a child is looking ...

Our intentions in taking a degree of license in terms of documenting *Becoming Plastic* is to emphasise the movement, in particular movement that Deleuze and Guattari would characterize as rhizomatic. Rhizomatic movement does not travel in straight lines; rather it ‘ceaselessly establishes connections’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 7). Think here of a children’s playground, where alliances are formed, break apart, reform ‘in a constantly changing set of relations’ where the odd remark can send a ripple ‘so that things fracture and reform along new lines’ (Tait, 2011, p. 12). Tait goes on to suggest that the artist’s role can be thought of in terms of movement where they have possibilities to rupture or fragment. Not to destroy but to set in motion other ripples, other movements. So if we return to the image of *Becoming Plastic* and if we keep in mind rhizomatic movement it becomes possible to contemplate how one word from an artist could have potentiated other moves. As Rajchman reminds us, ‘we must always make connections, since they are not already given (Rajchman, 2001, p. 7). It is, therefore, possible to think of the artist as ‘cutting chaos in a different way, ...through a different angle’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2008: 28). Rhizomatic movement as rupture is a form of intervention. The word ‘intervention’ is derived from the latin *intervenire*, ‘to come between’. Intervention in the context of artistic practices implies an artist aiming to disrupt power relations in the gallery where pre-existing objects are often presented as an authoritative representation of a given culture (Ashgate, 2011: 11). As one artist noted, ‘*Part of the role is to have conversations which I hope then might **spark** of something that’s happened outside, so kind of that thing of **making connections***’ (our emphasis). When artists intervene in the Clore, they intervene between past and future ways of seeing, thereby turning gallery objects into projects. Or put a little different into ‘becoming’.

The Clore Studio as pedagogical masterpiece: summarising the benefits of the space in terms of learning

We want to suggest that the Clore Art Studio is in itself a ‘pedagogical masterpiece’ (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 157), because it plays with and across a number of dualities including: body/mind; familiar/strange; real/imaginary; private space/public space. It is because of this play that the space is both cognizant with young peoples’ contemporary, domestic lives whilst at the same time it refrains from specifying in an overly direct way what should happen when each, young (or otherwise) person enters into relationship with the Studio. Here the familiar can become strange, and the strange can become domesticated where as an instance the metal internal supports of a huge lampshade can be transformed into a pet dog. Or adult-sized rubber gloves can be donned and through experimentation monsters are conjured on the white walls. It is a homely space which can potentiate the uncanny where, for example one wooden spoon played on a seat was able to incite an (un)orchestrated response amongst twenty or so children who took up the rhythm in ways that nobody could have predicted. Where one woman passing through was prompted to stop, listen and ask: *Had the children rehearsed? Had they been organized?...You mean, nobody told them to do that...?* (field notes, 30th January, 2013).

In addressing the question ‘which age groups benefits the most’ we are left with the issue of what we mean by ‘benefit’. Certainly from our own observations we saw preschool children move straight into the space and, with little hesitation, began engaging. Older children, perhaps because of their immersion in schooling would sometimes favour the table where there were pencils and paper that both signalled and potentiated familiar practices.

Yet, at the same time we saw teenagers take up the challenge of drawing where they ONLY had to look at their friend’s face and not lift the pencil from the page – an activity that made one young person say, *‘it is like trying to see with your hand...where the paper, the pencil and the hand are looking...but not your eyes.’*

We sympathise with one artist who, when pressed to say who benefitted the most, replied *‘it’s hard to know’*, a sentiment that we agree with. Like this artist we think that the Studio works for all ages but like her we also think that there are discourses in circulation that temper certain possibilities. For example, as the artist noted, *“we won’t see teenagers come in if there are lots of children about. Perhaps there is a lack of intergenerational play in the sense that, they will have a go if no one else is there. It’s the same with older adults, they will engage if there’s no one else in there”*. We also resonate with this artist’s view that the Clore Art Studio gives, *“a sort of permission to play, to feel that there is a space where there are possibilities and where we are not going to tell them what to think”*.

How can we optimise this learning environment in the future?

We want to begin this section of the evaluation report by recognising the inspiring work of the Family Learning Team. From the very many positive responses we have received from children and families, it is clear that the team, including artists and volunteers, work together so as to ensure that the creative possibilities of the Clore Art Studio are potentiated.

It is also clear that whilst the Clore Art Studio is underpinned by thoughtful planning there are elements of their work, which can be fraught because of its public nature. For example, on one occasion a group of children aged 5 – 6 years were visiting the Studio. This was a significant group because they had contributed to the curating of the Studio space. As we referred to previously, it was this group who initiated the drumming that encouraged a highly positive response from one member of the public.

However, for another individual, who was visiting the soon to close Grayson Perry exhibition, it was intrusive to the point where they made a complaint to a gallery attendant. Rather than hush the children and interrupt a moment, a member of the Family Learning team closed the interconnecting doors, thus minimising the noise. This highly practical response meant that the drumming could continue. It also meant that both the teachers and the Family Learning team could relax.

This moment does however raise some interesting thoughts in relation to future activities within the Clore where noise will be a continuing issue. One fairly basic consideration could be located around planning where given the likelihood that significant exhibitions are likely to draw considerably more people in the final viewing week larger groups of children are planned for at other times.

Another basic consideration is located around how activities get branded and to be mindful of the expectations that surround language when advertising the Clore Art Studio. There was some confusion, for instance, as to the role of the 'artist' in facilitating the space at the weekend, and the nature of 'Mini Monday's'. The following three extracts summarise some of these frustrations where there is a gap between expectations and the reality of what is on offer at the Clore:

Within a few minutes of me [an artist] being here I was approached by a disgruntled mum who wanted to know where today's 'painting' was going on. She was adamant that she had seen it advertised online, that an activity was going on in here today with an artist. I gave her a family leaflet and explained what was going on today, but they were not happy and left disgruntled! I think from the very brief conversation I've had, that the perception of what an artist being in the Clore 1-3pm at the weekend would actually be doing and what some parents would want us to be doing is not the same... Just something to think about really as at times these weekend sessions do just feel like we are just playing around, which of course is the point in a way, but it seems this parent at least thought that was pointless and a waste of time. (artist).

I arrived on Saturday at about 1.30pm with my son. We were expecting an activity to be going on in the Clore but no one was there, it was like going in on any other day. I asked one of the volunteers if there was supposed to be an artist there today and she told me they only come in about once a month. That's not what it says on the website. I came quite a long way with a small child and expected some sort of activity with an artist to be going on. I was disappointed' (parent).

'I assumed that 'Mini Monday's' were planned sessions. We've been to Mini Art Club before and had a really fantastic time. We walked in on Monday though and there wasn't even anybody there. Why bother to allocate a time and give it a name if nothing specific is going on?' (parent).

Working through tensions

In trying to offer 'fresh and innovative' approaches within the Studio whilst also recognizing that other parts of the Gallery are still inhabited by a complex mix of traditional and contemporary ideas is going to present challenges that will have to be considered and negotiated in the future. Our evaluation, together with the responses that the draft report provoked from members of the gallery staff, identified a number of tensions and issues for further exploration, including:

- The imperative to keep children safe whilst allowing them the space for taking risks, where there are opportunities for children to have agency so as to create, innovate and explore;
- The potential for infusing different spaces with new sounds and unusual noises, where silent appreciation and whispered contemplations typically mark the art gallery space out as distinctly quiet;
- The commitment to allow children a strong sense of freedom to interrogate objects and play out ideas whilst being conscious of, and often pulled towards, more familiar pedagogical instruction and guidance;
- The desire to maintain and preserve limited and fragile resources whilst allowing children the freedom to use resources in any way they wish to. Developing a balance between what could be easily self-managed and that which is eclectic and full of choices, but difficult to maintain;
- The intention to deliberately disorientate audiences in an attempt to force a reconsideration of space, of exhibitions and of the very idea of what goes on in an art gallery, whilst being mindful that some adults and children need (re)orientation, and want grounding;
- The potential to embrace the possibilities of flows in the form of audiences, of light, of people, of ideas, and of connections across and through galleries and around the Clore Art Studio whilst recognising that at times, it is necessary to close off spaces;
- The struggle to manage, develop and support the Clore Studio as a space for freedom and unpredictability, whilst not interrupting the experience of those around;
- The aim to link the gallery exhibition (for example, Grayson Perry's tapestries) and the Clore Studio – a natural link or a contextual link that had to be created by the creative practitioners / artists and volunteers;
- The need to familiarise external people and volunteers with the pedagogical language to talk about what is happening (or could happen) in the space, without excluding or rendering the space elitist or inaccessible;
- The importance of developing the potentially fluid status of the artists the gallery works with - artist-educators and the studio as 'educational' space and artists who work in the Clore Studio as a space considered in terms of its artistic merit. If the Clore Studio straddles both these positions, how are they antagonistic of, and productive for each other?
- The opportunities to re-evaluate the Clore Studio's commitment to artists who develop the space as an installation. How could the experience allow for reflexivity;
- The responsibility to preserve the artist's authorial intent within the Clore space whilst responding to creative changes over the lifetime of the Studio's experience;
- The possibility of building longer lead in research periods for artists, volunteers and the education team to know and understand each other better against time constraints that determine preparation periods.

In addressing these tensions in future initiatives we suggest that the Family Learning team continue to work with and be supported by the philosophical concepts that we have drawn on throughout this report including ‘assemblage’ and ‘becoming’. So rather than thinking of the Studio as a discrete, bounded space, the Deleuzian idea of assemblage allows the studio to be always opening out to different encounters, lines of flight and new connections. It is within these movements that children and their families will themselves be in a state of flux where each encounter with the Clore will be a process of negotiation. This will allow for moves where as one mother noted, *“The first time we went in we were both a bit unsure what to do (not helped by the fact we were the only ones in there!)”*. But she then went on to say, *“With each visit I like it more though and I think this is mainly because I am figuring out how best to facilitate my daughter to play and interact with the objects, and also she is now becoming familiar with different things she can do when she’s in there...”*. Thus the assemblage allows for ‘figuring’ where visitors are implicated in the learning and in this sense become part responsible for what happens within the Clore.

Similarly the idea of ‘becoming’ will, we believe, help the team to think beyond the stranglehold of those binaries where there is the imperative to decide that something is right or wrong or that there should or should not be, for example, noise, music or a sense of freedom. As has been noted the concept of ‘becoming’, draws in affect and sensation. Affect and sensation are always in circulation and hence are always up for grabs. And whilst affect cannot resolve some of the listed tensions they can nevertheless allow for movements, different lines of rhizomatic flights and curious molecular mingling. As one artist noted, for her the phenomena of shadows could execute a number of twists and turns. At times they were ‘dark’ or ‘imaginative’, or ‘expressionistic’, or resonated with ‘*the idea of the consciousness coming out of dreams*’. But where she could also connect shadows to ‘*physics*’, to ‘*cause and effect*’ but yet they were ‘*simple*’. It is through twisting and turning around ideas, including shadows, that forms of pedagogy can emerge that resists linear instructions. The artist becomes one of the ‘things’ gathered in a process of becoming, where there is a transformation, transforming the studio from a place of information and authority to one of experience, curiosity, creativity, energy and inspiration. It is by thinking of themselves as “nomadic, polyvocal, rhizomatic ... processual, intensive and indivisible, on the molecular side” (c: 20) that the artist can potentiate what one parent described as ‘*freedom*’, that is “*the freedom to think, where they do not have to follow rigid lines*”. But as one volunteer sagely remarked, “*Some people have said they don’t like this new space, they preferred the old interactive gallery. People will probably not like it again when we change it with the new exhibition, but they’ll get used to it and find their way around again*”

Finally, in thinking of the future we would like to suggest that the Family Learning Team draw on their wealth of expertise and creativity so as to make interesting connections between the wider gallery collections and temporary exhibitions and to signal these connections in a more forceful way. Are there possibilities, for example, for deliberately juxtaposing images that have emerged from children’s engagements with the Clore studio with Grayson Perry’s work and displaying these in prominent

places? This would also allow the Family Learning Team opportunities to simply state some of the philosophical underpinnings that inform their work. Moreover, by displaying, for instance, Perry's *The Upper Class at Bay* side by side with *Becoming Plastic* the two images can work together in setting off sparks and shifts, including perhaps, shifts in how status is awarded to art and artefacts.

We want to close with where we started with the child Matilda and our own efforts in juxtaposition.



Pere Borrell del Caso, 1874



Rosalind Jones, 2013

In setting Pere Borrell del Caso's, *Escaping Criticism* side by side with Rosalind Jones' photograph of her daughter isn't there some sort of uncanny business occurring where both children pull at one another? Where time moves backwards and forwards? Where there is a curious interplay between the face, body and hands of each child? Where we want to both smile because there is a sort of joke at play yet we nevertheless find a degree of solace perhaps comfort in that both children are contained within their respective frames. All of which puts us in mind of 'pedagogical masterpiece', which is the Clore Art Studio.

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